LABYRINTH. The word labyrinth refers to a large variety of drawings and patterns, some intricate, some less so, ranging from prehistoric rock engravings to modern art, as well as to highly complex symbolic and mythological structures around which an immense richness of meaning has accumulated during the course of many centuries and civilizations. The word is used to describe:

(1) a difficult path, or passage, or tunnel, often underground, through which it is extremely hazardous to find one’s way without guidance

(2) a seemingly unending building of innumerable rooms and galleries intended to confound intruders and lead them astray

(3) metaphorically, any kind of complexity from which it is almost impossible to extricate oneself.

In this last and more general use, and under the pressure of the growing complexities of the contemporary world, the very old symbol of the labyrinth has come back with renewed vitality to haunt the subconscious of modern humankind and reenter the vocabulary of art and literature. What makes the labyrinth, in its wealth of analogical associations, so relevant today is the fact that it is an emblem of the existentia dilemmas of modern urbanites, who find themselves trapped in a prisonlike world and condemned to wander aimlessly therein. However, the labyrinth catches the imagination not just because it reminds one that one is lost in its bowels and about to be devoured by the Minotaur but also because it suggests that somewhere in the dark pit there must be an almost forgotten center from which, after the ultimate trial confronting terror and death, one may find the way out to freedom. These hints of fear and hope are, in fact, echoes of very ancient myths, among which stands the famous story of Theseus and the Minotaur.

THE MYTH OF THE MINOAN LABYRINTH. In concise terms the myth of the Minoan labyrinth tells of Minos, who became king of Crete when Poseidon, god of the sea, sent him...
a bull from the sea in answer to his prayers. But Minos failed to sacrifice the animal, as ordered by Poseidon, and so became sterile. Pasiphaé, daughter of the Sun and wife of Minos, conceived a passion for the bull; she placed herself inside an artificial cow, built for the purpose by Daedalus, and made love with the animal. The Minotaur, a monster half man and half bull, was born of this union. King Minos, appalled by this event, ordered Daedalus to build a labyrinth from which no one could escape and had the Minotaur hidden within it.

The town of Athens, which had been recently conquered by Crete, was ordered to send every eight years seven youths and seven maidens to be devoured by the Minotaur. The time came when the Athenian hero Theseus decided to put an end to this dreadful tribute and offered himself as one of the seven young men to be sacrificed. He entered the labyrinth and killed the monster, finding his way out again with the help of a ball of string he had spun out behind him, a gift to him from Ariadne, the enamored daughter of Minos.

After this triumph, however, things began to go wrong. First, on his way back to Athens, on the island of Naxos, the proud hero abandoned Ariadne while she was asleep and decided to marry her sister Phaedra—a decision that later proved disastrous. Then he forgot to substitute the black sails of his ship for white ones, as he had promised his father, King Aegeus, he would do if he had slain the Minotaur; the old Athenian king, on seeing the black sails in the distance, believed that Theseus was dead and so jumped off a cliff to his death. Meanwhile, the furious Minos punished Daedalus by incarcerating him and his son Icarus in the maze. Although Daedalus was the architect of the labyrinth, he could not find his way out. Therefore he decided to escape by the only possible route: upward. With feathers and wax he manufactured two pairs of wings; he warned his son not to ascend too high, his way out. Therefore he decided to escape by the only possible route: upward. With feathers and wax he manufactured two pairs of wings; he warned his son not to ascend too high, and the two flew away. Icarus, however, intoxicated by the wonders of flight, forgot his father's advice and soared too near the sun; the wax of his wings melted, and he plunged into the sea and disappeared. The more cautious Daedalus landed safely in Sicily.

Many aspects of this story require careful study before one can fully grasp its meaning. Four of its more relevant themes are these:

1. There is the suggestion that the labyrinth is related to an unresolved conflict that carries a costly toll of guilt and fear—the annual sacrifice of the seven boys and girls—that can only be settled through the intervention of a "hero."

2. It is also suggested that the way out of this conflict depends on mnemonics and feats of memory—Ariadne's thread—and on the ability to "fly," that is, to achieve a higher level of consciousness.

3. The myth points to the ultimate failure of the hero. It is important that Theseus, apparently the hero, meets a dismal end when later he descends to hell, helped this time not by a loving woman but by a bandit named Peritoo, in an attempt to abduct Persephone, the wife of Hades; the project fails. Peritoo is dismembered by the three-headed dog Kerberos, and Theseus, lost in the labyrinth of Hades, is turned into a stone. This implies that the killing of the Minotaur is less heroic than it seems, for it involves the brutal suppression of a problem instead of the attempt at a harmonious solution.

4. Finally, the story of Theseus in the labyrinth can be seen as symbolizing the dangers of initiation according to a well-known pattern of descensus ad inferos, symbolic death and return to life.

**The Labyrinth as Symbol.** This article shall now briefly review some of the more significant connotations of the idea of the labyrinth itself. It should be kept in mind that all symbols and myths can be interpreted on many different levels and ask for a continuing effort of hermeneutics.

**Descent into the unconscious.** Entering the labyrinth stands for what a psychoanalyst would describe as a descent into the subconscious layers of the psyche, with its obscurities and terrors, its traumas, complexes, and unresolved emotional conflicts.

**Regressus ad uterum.** Entry into the labyrinth recalls well a retreat into the bosom of Mother Earth, conceived also as yoni, grave, and magic oven, and related to the "V. I. T. R. I. O. L." injunction of alchemy attributed to Basilius Valentinus—"Visitabis Interiorem Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem" ("Visit the interior of the earth and by rectifying thou wilt find the secret stone"). This connotation is particularly strong in cave and underground labyrinths. In fact, many megalithic stone engravings seem to associate labyrinthine patterns simultaneously with the cult of the dead and symbols of fecundity, as for instance in the drawings in Val Camonica, Italy. In many cases prehistoric drawings show what seem to be the female genitalia; sometimes they show concentric circles with a straight or serpentine line running to the center, suggesting spermatozoa reaching the ovum. This is the kind of drawing Moritz Hoerner and Oswald Menghin called Ringwallbilder and considered the simplest and most common of labyrinthine patterns found in Europe. Explicit sexual symbolism can be found also in the Etruscan vase of Tragliatella (Museum of the Capitolium, Rome) and in connection with Knossos-type labyrinths.

**Nekuia or the descent into Hades.** In close association with the symbolism of a regressus ad uterum is that of a nekuia, or descent into Hades, to the underworld abode of the dead where an invisible fire transforms all bodies that enter it. Inner fire destroys and melts, but as the athanor (the symbolic furnace of physical or moral transmutation) of the alchemist, it also purifies, regenerates, transmutes, and produces "gold."

**Meeting the monster.** Visiting the underworld entails meeting its guardians: Kerberos, old women and magicians,
monsters and demons. Horned figures identical with the Minotaur can be found in many prehistoric drawings, as in Val Camonica, Italy, and the Cueva de los Letreros, Spain, as well as in ancient Egypt; they bring to mind the traditional images of the devil in Christian and other traditions.

The Minotaur’s horns can be related to the idea of a crown, not only through etymology but also through symbolic associations. In Delos was an altar, named Keraton, made of the horns of bulls and goats and linked to the cult of Apollo Karneios, protector of horned animals. Another interesting link can be established between horns and the labrums, or the double ax. William H. Matthews (1922) reports that the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, during his researches at Mycenae, unearthed from one of the graves an ox head of gold plate with a double ax between the upper horns. The double ax was the sign of the Zeus worshiped at Labraunda, and it occurs frequently in the Minoan palace of Knossos discovered by Arthur Evans; it was obviously an object of great importance and was linked with the cult of the bull. There was even a tomb shaped like a double ax that contained a big ax and some smaller ones. Evans, in the light of these and other discoveries, concluded that the palace of Knossos was the labyrinth, or “house of the Labrys,” although some scholars dispute this. Confirming the initiatory symbolism of the labyrinth, some authors think that the ax signifies the “power of light” and is the equivalent to sword, hammer, and cross (Juan-Eduardo Cirlot); it corresponds to the Indian vajra and to Jupiter’s lightning, symbols of the celestial illumination at the center, and as such it may reveal the symbolic reversal of polarities implied by Gemini (Luc Benoist); in any case, the ax and the labyrinth respond to each other as representations of the supreme center and of a supreme principle (Mario Pasotti).

Temenos, or the enclosed space. Burying the dead and sowing seeds consecrates the ground. This creates a privileged place, a place of sacred mystery, of a conjunctio oppositorum, where life and death, light and darkness, male and female principles transform and melt into each other. In this connection the labyrinth acquires new symbolic functions, becoming a prophylactic device, a defensive wall, a trap for hostile invaders, while remaining at the same time, for those who know it, the secret path to the initiation chambers in which the “second birth” takes place. Both in magical terms and in actual fact, it comes to represent the protective ramparts of the most precious spiritual treasures of the clan. And then it becomes also the defense of the house of the living, the rampart of the town and the town itself. In southern India the Tamil women draw labyrinthine patterns on the threshold of their houses in the month of Margali, or Mrgasira, corresponding to the period of the winter solstice, during which the sun is “dead”; some of these patterns, called kolams, are named brahmanamudi (“Brahma knot”) and form a continuous line with no beginning and no end.

Daedalus. Labyrinthine defense develops with the rise of agrarian empires. The need to protect crops creates the need to build secure storage places; the silo foretells the stronghold. Soon the labyrinth becomes the emblem of the treasure house, of the king’s palace (as in Knossos), of the defensive walls of the town, of the urbs. It is not surprising, thus, to find out that the name Daedalus, the inventor and mythic architect of the Minotaur’s labyrinth, means “to build well”; Daedalus’s ascendancy is also significant, for his ancestors are Hephaistos, god of underground fire and an architect himself; Gaia, the earth, mother of all things; and Erechteion, their son, a half god whose nature is partly that of human, serpent, and wind.

According to Homer the ramparts of Troy were built by Apollo and Neptune disguised as humans; metaphorically, form-giving intelligence and solar reason combine with the energy-giving depths of the collective psyche to create the urban labyrinth symbol. In Indian myth the god of heavens, Varuṇa, whose power is symbolized by a knotlike emblem, commands the divine architect Visvakarma to build a castle of one hundred rooms where the sun woman Sutya shall be kept.

It is interesting, from this point of view, to recall some of the popular names of labyrinths current in Europe, like the Scandinavian “Ruins of Jerusalem,” “City of Nineveh,” “Walls of Jericho,” and “Babylon,” as well as the frequent names meaning “the castle of Troy,” like Trajin, Troyburg, Trojburg, Treiborg, Truberslot, and so forth. This suggests that popular imagination sees the labyrinth as the symbol of a legendary town doomed to destruction. In contrast, the labyrinths that can still be seen on the floor of European churches and cathedrals, where penitents used to walk on their knees as the equivalent of a pilgrimage to the holy places were called, among other names, La Lieue de Jerusalem (“the Jerusalem mile”). In them is found a clear symbol of the archetypal town, taken now as the promised celestial bride, the Heavenly Jerusalem glorified by the apostle John, as opposed to the doomed City of Destruction of the biblical apocalypse.

Ascent to the sacred mountain. If the labyrinth, as has been seen, denotes the underworld in its catharsis, in its descent “to the left” (the “sinister” direction), it also implies the meaning of an anarsi, or ascent to light and light in its turnings “to the right.” These opposed movements are both comprised in the wholeness of the symbol. The link between them is evident in the wholeness of the symbol. The link between them is evident in the rapid passage from the maze’s bottom, or from the pit of hell, into the mountain’s ascent, or the liberating flight. In the legend of Minos, Daedalus escapes the prison by using artificial wings. In his Commedia Dante reaches the depths of hell only to find that he is at the bottom of the mountain of purgatory, which he subsequently climbs with his guide Vergil. Similarly, at the entrance of the cave leading to the Maya kingdom of the dead stands the stairway pyramid, symbolizing ascent to the heavens, and, according to Codex Borgia, after the terrifying journey to the
abyss, the soul turns right into the realm of regenerating water and purifying fire, to be born again.

In the archetypal town the center represents this place of rebirth and ascent and is occupied by an empty space, which marks the vertical axis that links the different planes of the cosmos, or by a temple, which symbolizes the sacred mountain. The temple or the mountain’s axis is again the central passage along which the underworld communicates with the world of humans and the world of the gods. Such is the symbolism of the Temple of Solomon, built on Mount Moriah; of the sacred Mount Tabor; of the Samaritans’ Mount Gerizim; of the Batu-Ribn, the cosmic rock of the Semang of Malacca, on which once stood a tree rising to heaven; of the subterranean temples of the Pueblo Indians of North America, in which a hole in the ground and a ladder to the ceiling link the netherworld to the worlds above; of the Ka'bah in Mecca, the sacred stone that fell from the sky, leaving a hole corresponding to the North Star that is known as the Door of Heaven; and so forth. The center of the labyrinth, the axis mundi, the vertical alignment of the centers of the abyss, of the earth and of the heavens, the temple, the sacred mountain, and the infinite number of variations on these themes—all are parts of the same symbolic constellation.

Dance, playground, garden, and game. As shall be seen below, there is a profound link between the labyrinth and dance. Legend says that Daedalus built in the agora of Knossos the first place for sacred dances. After the victory of Theseus over the Minotaur, the feat was reenacted on the island of Delos in a nightly dance dedicated to the goddess of love that was known by the name of geranos, a word coming from the Greek for “cranes,” probably because these birds fly in a straight line.

Things sacred do not disappear with time, even when they are seemingly abandoned in favor of other traditions, beliefs, and cultures; they often survive in folklore, in popular and peasant festivals and traditions, in children’s games, in plays and playgrounds. Labyrinthine games were extremely popular in England; witness the many surviving “turf-mazes,” sometimes called “Troy towns” or “Caerdroia,” which follow the pattern of the labyrinths seen on coins from Knossos. The art of trimming hedges of evergreens is very old; it made possible the creation of hedge mazes in gardens that became popular in the seventeenth century, especially in Holland, France, and England. And the type of game in which a path must be followed to a center, like jeu de l’oeie, snakes and ladders, and so many others everywhere is an example of how the symbol of the labyrinth has survived in children’s games and puzzles.

Types of Labyrinth. Such a wealth of connotations and interlinked meanings combine in the single symbolic structure of the labyrinth. This article can give only a pale idea of its riches. They show its antiquity and the accumulation of many layers of magical, religious, intuitive, rational, and metaphysical significance. Over the centuries the idea of the labyrinth has evolved and acquired new meanings that have influenced its design. The discussion that follows will attempt to categorize these different labyrinthine patterns.

The serpentine linear labyrinth. A type of proto-labyrinthine pattern of wandering or undulating lines, sometimes going in one direction and then turning back in the opposite one, is frequent in prehistoric rock engravings; in some cases it appears in combination with spiral labyrinths. Serpentine lines evoke a voyage “to the left and to the right” and connote a fate decided by various opposing influences, visible and invisible—the path of the nomad or the hunter, the passage of humanity through space and time.

Ringwallbilder. A type of drawing known to scholarship as a Ringwallbilder consists basically of concentric circles penetrated by a straight or serpentine line. The central point corresponds to origin, to the fiat, to the manifestation of divine energy. In its dimensionless recesses is concealed the mysterious inmost womb of all creation and all creatures. Thus new life and fertility depend on the hidden center—of being, of the earth, of the mother. Ringwallbilder relate to a cosmogonic vision, to the mystery of life-generating processes, to fertility and sexual symbolism.

The spiral labyrinth. Basically the spiral labyrinth is made of a spiral line turning around a center; it implies a double movement, inward and outward, sometimes drawn into a double spiral. Many types of design are possible: the well-known representation of yin and yang and the Grecian motifs can be considered variations of the spiral. Because a spiral leaves no alternative paths, some authors prefer to call it a pseudolabyrinth. Spiral labyrinths are very frequent. Their first appearance is probably linked to the human revolutionary passage from neolithic nomadism to the settled agrarian life, a passage that forced a reappraisal of fertility, cosmic cycles, and earthly and motherly deities. Agriculture implies a fixed life and the creation of privileged loci, as well as the belief in the “resurrection” of seeds by invisible forces hidden in the earth, which is conceived as an inner fire capable of “digesting” whatever goes underground. It is not surprising, then, to find an ancient relation between the spiral and intestines, as in several drawings of the so-called Röngen-style, frequent among Arctic populations, or in certain Japanese ceramics of the Jomon period. Károly Kerényi studied what he considered the first kind of labyrinth—the spiral—in the most ancient examples available: several clay plaquettes found during excavations in Babylon that show drawings of intestines. According to some scholars, the inscription on this drawing is kal tivrati (“palace of viscera”); these plaquettes were probably used for divination. The bowels, through internal heat, or “fire,” were supposed to create a form of energy that is analogous to the inner fire of the earth as shown in the slow “digestion” of seeds, ores, and crystals and in the sudden eruption of volcanoes.

The spiral labyrinth is simultaneously the intestine, digestion, and energy, as can be seen in some ancient documents—in the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, the face of the
horned monster Huwawa is made of viscera—as well as in much more recent ones—like the Romanesque paintings in which the abdomen of the figure of Christ in majesty displays the arms of a spiral and the frescoes that depict the triumph of Death in the Campo Santo of Pisa, in which a sinner’s exposed bowels form a spiral. To eat and to be eaten are correlative moments in the cosmic balance; digestion in *viscera terrae* corresponds to death and dissolution, to the interchange of energies, to transmutation, and to promised resurrection. Jurgis Baltrusaitis says that until Carolingian times sepulchers often contained spiral-shaped snail shells, to symbolize a tomb from which humankind will rise again. Similarly, in Kansu, China, funerary urns of the Ma Chang period have been found decorated with cowrie patterns, also known as death patterns, spiral motifs that symbolize the promise of an afterlife. The earth, like an abdomen, ingests the seed, the dead, the sun, or the virgin before it allows the revival of plants, of souls, or of spring and fruits.

Several known myths of distinct areas and epochs follow an identical pattern of a virgin’s sacrifice and burial that is necessary to ensure future crops. In one such myth, collected by Adolf E. Jensen from among the Maros of the island of Ceram in Indonesia, the virgin Hainuwele is put to death after a dance that lasts nine nights, during which men and women move along a big spiral centered upon a hole in the ground; the virgin is gradually pushed into that hole and, after the sacrifice, is buried in it; Malua Satene, probably a death deity, infuriated by the murder of Hainuwele, forces every person to pass through a door decorated with a spiral of nine circulations; those incapable of passing the portal are transformed into animals or spirits.

A definite link connects the spiral labyrinth with ritual dance. In Kerényi’s opinion, all research into the labyrinth should take dance as its starting point. Peasants in many places still dance around a tree or pole (the maypole in “dragon’s play”) of France, Germany, and England, a feast in the orderly vertical and horizontal arms of the cross, which when repeated create geometric patterns. In Kansu, China, funerary urns of the Ma Chang period, seen as “dance of the maidens”). There are often performed in- side a labyrinth made of stones aligned on the ground; such stone labyrinths are known in Germany as Steintanz and in Scandinavia as jungfrudans (“dance of the maidens”). There is also a possible link between the paramilitary ritual games of the Ludus Troiae in ancient Rome, corresponding to an equestrians’ dance, and what became the tournaments of horsemen in the Middle Ages, as well as to the Ludus draconis (“dragon’s play”) of France, Germany, and England, a feast related to the cult of Saint George and the return of the spring. In fact, a vast number of sacred dances of great antiquity were associated with funeral, fertility, and shamanistic rites and were performed around a center that symbolized the *axis mundi*, the entrance to hell, or “Jacob’s Ladder” to the heavens; in the geranos dance of Delos the women held a string or band and moved along a spiral, first to the left, into death, and then to the right, to rebirth. Many types of such dances could be mentioned, like the shamanistic ones of Central Asia, the first element of which is spinning around a center. According to the Kojiki, a collection of narratives and myths written in Japan at the beginning of the seventh century, the marriage of the male and female aspects of divinity was preceded by a dance around the “august celestial pilaster.”

Spiral labyrinths connote symbolically also the serpent, as Indian tradition represents it implicitly in the first *cabra*, able to rise up the spine or *axis mundi*. The serpent motif, so charged with energy and meaning in Tantric as well as in Christian and many other cultures, is an ancient symbol connected with the earth that appeared on ceramics at the rise of agrarian civilization and spread to vast regions of Mesopotamia, India, and Mesoamerica. It is relevant to remember that in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, after the description of the equestrian dances that closed the funerary feats in honor of Anchises, it was told that a serpent crept out of the tomb and twisted its body in seven knots.

**The cross labyrinth.** The cross labyrinth combines the spiral motif with the partition of space in four directions. The transition from spiral to cross labyrinth results perhaps from the psychic situation created by the rise of agrarian and urban cultures. The city becomes the privileged and protected area where wealth, knowledge, and power, both material and spiritual, are concentrated. The center of the city, as center of the labyrinth, is turned into a crossroads from which distances are measured and time calculated. Four is the basic number of directions: sunrise, sunset, north, and south. A cross is the sign of their spreading from the central heart. The square, which evolves from the cross, then becomes the emblem of the rational *urbs* and the dwelling place of the new urbanite. The settlement of towns requires a mental revolution: people must make accurate forecasts and long-range plans; draw up laws and regulations, which implies a police force (the words *police* and *polity* both come from *polis*, “town”); and, last but not least, develop a “town memory” in the form of registers and archives, an act that requires the invention of writing. This change in thinking finds its visual expression in the orderly vertical and horizontal arms of the cross, which when repeated create geometric patterns based on squares. This type of geometric arrangement appeared in Mesopotamia and then, more suddenly, in Egypt in predynastic times, around the end of the fourth millennium; as René Huyghe points out, it served as a link in the passage from nomadism to settled life. The knife of Jebel el Arak, found near Dendera, a village on the Nile, is probably the first Egyptian example; the figures appear in parallel rows, not randomly, as in prehistoric art. This labyrinthine pattern eventually evolves into the classical model seen in the Knossos coins: a cross with its arms bent and turning around the center in curvilinear or, more often, straight movements at right angles. Examples of this type occur most frequently, from antiquity to modern times.

A walled, strong, and organized city may reveal itself as a prison to its inhabitants, just as the labyrinth, after some
authors, may have been used in a remote past to trap wild animals. Lost is the freedom of movement and direct contact with the spirits of nature. The mythical Minotaur is, thus, also the symbol of the repressed part of human nature, prerational and vital, which the new city hero wants to subdue; the artifices of Daedalus and the needs of the emerging state hide the “monster” in the underground, and Theseus, with the help of artful memory tricks, decides to suppress it. But this is a fatal mistake on the part of the hero, for the Minotaur is also the hidden source of his own energy and power; killing the monster brings tragic forgetfulness, loss of purpose, decay, and disaster. In fact, the Minotaur cannot die. He takes his revenge in the same labyrinth, which is turned now into hell, for the Minotaur is also the promise of the sun’s rebirth (as the constellation Taurus brings back spring’s vitality), and through the sun’s rays Icarus is punished for his arrogance in trying to evade complexity and enjoy a new, marvelous freedom in the belief that he has to thank his own inflated ego alone.

The cross inside the spiral suggests a divine sacrifice necessary to redeem those who became lost in the “city of perdition”; Christ, like Theseus, descends to hell, but instead of killing the monster, he redeems the condemned. As an *iter mysticum* to salvation, the cross labyrinth was extensively used in Christian ethics and symbolical art, in illuminated manuscripts, on the floor of cathedrals, in painting, and in heraldic and esoteric emblems, especially after the twelfth century. In literature the connotations of this type of labyrinth have inspired poems, stories, and Hermetic and symbolic writings, from the cycle of the Holy Grail legends to the seventeenth-century writings of John Bunyan and Johannes Amos Comenius.

The cross is an immensely rich symbol. It reconciles opposed directions and divided drives at its center, where the revolutions of the labyrinthine universe find their fixed axis, just as in one of the coins from Knossos one sees the arms of a squared spiral turn around the polestar or the fixed sun.

The thread and the knot. The red thread of Ariadne is a symbol of memory, as mentioned before; it symbolizes as well the sun’s rays and the way to liberation. But the thread also binds when it turns and twists itself into knots, both as the cords tie the prisoner and as words compromise or the vow commits an honest person. The knots of Varuna are the symbol of the god’s power to tie and untie, of the magic forces of sovereignty concentrated in the king or chief—justice, administration, public security, political decision, in fact, all the “powers,” as Georges Dumézil established when he studied the Ouranos-Varuna symbolism. The knot contributes to the labyrinth as a rising device, a symbol of centralized urban power and “amazing” artifice, and as such is linked to Daedalus, the artist and the inventor. But the knot also symbolizes initiation and, through its intricate detours, the journey of the soul to salvation.

The native peoples of the Malekula Islands in Vanuatu believe in a “journey of the dead,” as John Layard (1937) has observed; according to one of the oldest variants of their myth, the soul must pass the “waters of death” and then, at the entrance of the cave leading to the kingdom of the souls, be confronted with the “female devouring ghost.” This ghost has previously drawn with her finger on the sand of the floor of the cave, a geometric “knotty” pattern of considerable complexity: It is made of one uninterrupted line, named the “way” or “the path.” Half of the drawing has been erased by the ghost, however, and the soul must remake the missing half correctly before being admitted into the cave. The female devouring ghost will eat those who are unable to complete the drawing. In preparation for this journey the Malekula islanders practice the ritual drawing of difficult patterns on the sand.

One is reminded here of the cave of the sibyl of Cumae, in the sixth book of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and of the labyrinth drawn at its entrance. One-line, complex patterns evoke as well the famous *Concatenation* drawn by Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Dürer’s *Sechs Knoten*, and the arabesques of Muslim art (in architecture, in frontispieces to the Qur’an, in tile and carpet motifs). One is also reminded of many well-known Celtic labyrinthine designs sculpted on crosses and stones, such as the Carndonagh Cross at Donegal, in Ireland, and the Jelling Stone in Denmark.

The thread symbolizes guidance through a difficult path or through initiatory rites, the loving or charitable gift of secret knowledge, and the promise of freedom. In India the monks of Viśṇu receive a sacred thread, and neophytes learn to perform symbolic exercises with it. Metaphysically, the thread is that with which God made all things, his divine logos; with it the sun, like a spider, unites the worlds. The *Satapatha Brahmana* calls it the “wind” thread, and the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* comments that the knowledge of this thread and of *brahma* is the supreme knowledge of being in all its manifestations. Knowing that there is only one thread in spite of the infinite variety of its knots, as Ananda Coomaraswamy ponders, brings one safely to the end of the path, to the center, and to the cosmic architect, himself the way and the door.

The celestial city and the *mandala*. Finding the way through a labyrinth, conceived as a mental, spiritual, and metaphysical enigma, corresponds to the successful conclusion of an *iter mysticum*. It can be expressed visually by transformation of the labyrinth drawing into what in Indo-Tibetan terms is known as *mandala*. The *mandala* (the more schematic linear variations are called *vantras*) basically consists of a circle enclosing a square divided into four triangles; in the center of each triangle, as well as in the center of the whole drawing, are circles that contain the images of deities. This pattern can take an infinite number of variations, some of which are similar to the classical pattern of the labyrinth: Many *mandalas* show bastions, ramparts, towers, and gardens. All are conducive to yogic meditation; they are meant to protect the meditator from distraction caused by unconscious impulses and lead him or her to a *desensus ad inferos*.
where the meditator meets his or her "ghosts," and, recognizing their true nature, conquers them. Step by step the meditator is led out of the ocean of samsāra—the overpowering illusion of the complexity of appearances—to gain a new realization of being.

The mandala is therefore a chart of the cosmos, including the axis mundi, the cosmic mountain of Sumeru, the palace of the cakravarātri ("universal monarch"), and, according to the Tantric text, the Sādhanaṃāla ("city of liberation"). The city of liberation evokes the celestial Jerusalem that descends from the heavens at the end of time; like a mandala, the celestial city expresses the final unification of opposites and the emergence of the transcendental ego—the "secret self" or ātman of the Vedanta, the Self in Jung's terminology. The rose windows in medieval churches and cathedrals of the West, considered one of the greatest achievements of European art, are mandalas, symbolizing the process leading to the ultimate metamorphosis of humankind. Their colored light, circular shape, and geometric crystallization suggest the attained final radiance of the "adamantine body."

SEE ALSO Center of the World; Crossroads; Descent into the Underworld; Knots; Mandalas.

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LIMA DE FREITAS (1987)

Revised Bibliography

LADY OF THE ANIMALS. The term Lady of the Animals is a scholarly convention used to describe anthropomorphic images of Goddesses with companion animals. The image of the Lady of the Animals is well known to readers of the classics: Aphrodite riding a goose or in a chariot drawn by doves, Athena with her owl, and Artemis with her deer. But the image goes back much further than the classical age of Greece (fifth and fourth centuries BCE), even much further back than the times of Homer (before 700 BCE) and Hesiod (c. 700 BCE). Female images with zoomorphic body parts